

FOREIGN POLICY

'I'm not happy about it': Dems torch Biden's Russian pipeline deal

President Joe Biden is facing bipartisan backlash to his administration's agreement with Germany that allows a controversial Russian natural-gas pipeline to be completed.



A view of Nord Stream 2 pipes at the Mukran port near Sassnitz, Germany. | Axel Schmidt/Getty Images

By **ANDREW DESIDERIO** and **ALEXANDER WARD**

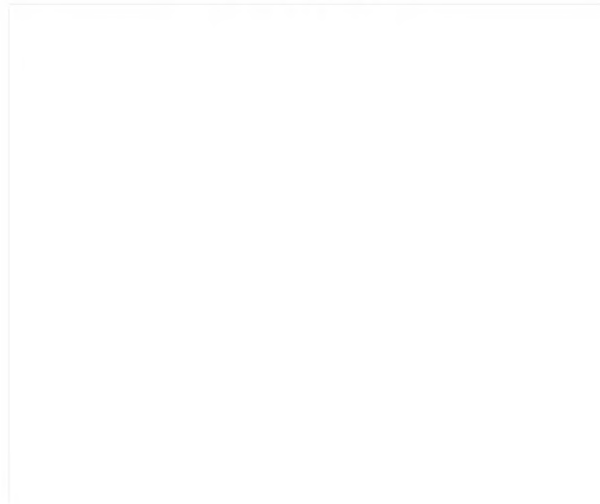
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President Joe Biden is facing bipartisan backlash to his administration's agreement with Germany that allows a controversial Russian natural-gas pipeline to be completed, arguing that the deal is a boon to Moscow at the expense of Ukraine.

Biden and his deputies have long been at odds with members of Congress on the pipeline, known as Nord Stream 2, with lawmakers overwhelmingly approving a slate of mandatory sanctions aimed at crippling the pipeline over geopolitical and environmental concerns.

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The president waived many of those sanctions earlier this year as part of his broader efforts to repair transatlantic alliances with countries like Germany, which has been pushing for Nord Stream 2 to be completed. And on Wednesday, the U.S. and Germany announced a deal aimed at mollifying Ukraine, which stands to lose the most from the pipeline's completion.

"I'm not happy about it," said Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Va.), a member of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations committees. "I'm not happy about it in terms of the Russia politics, and I'm not happy about it in terms of climate change."



Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Va.) speaks during a Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee hearing on March 18, 2021. | Susan Walsh-Pool/Getty Images

Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.), who co-authored the sanctions regime, said she was “skeptical that [the agreement] will be sufficient when the key player at the table — Russia — refuses to play by the rules.”

The Biden administration has effectively concluded that the pipeline will be completed regardless of whether the U.S. moves to stop it. The agreement struck between the U.S. and Germany seemingly puts the onus on Germany to ensure Ukraine, which has suffered the brunt of Russia’s aggression under Vladimir Putin, doesn’t feel abandoned by the pact. Already, though, Ukraine is hammering the U.S. and Germany for its “resignation” on the effort to stop the pipeline.

Senior administration officials describing the deal said Berlin will appoint a special envoy to help Ukraine negotiate an extension of its gas transit deal with Russia beyond 2024, the current expiration year. Germany will also create and administer a \$1 billion green fund for Ukraine to support its energy transition beyond fossil fuels, with at least an initial \$175 million commitment. Ukraine needs that money because it [stands to lose billions](#) should its transit contract with Russia end.

There will also be a 60 million euro resilience package, effectively to protect against cyber attacks. And Germany will enhance its engagement with the Three Seas Initiative, a key forum for Central and Eastern European nations to discuss regional matters.

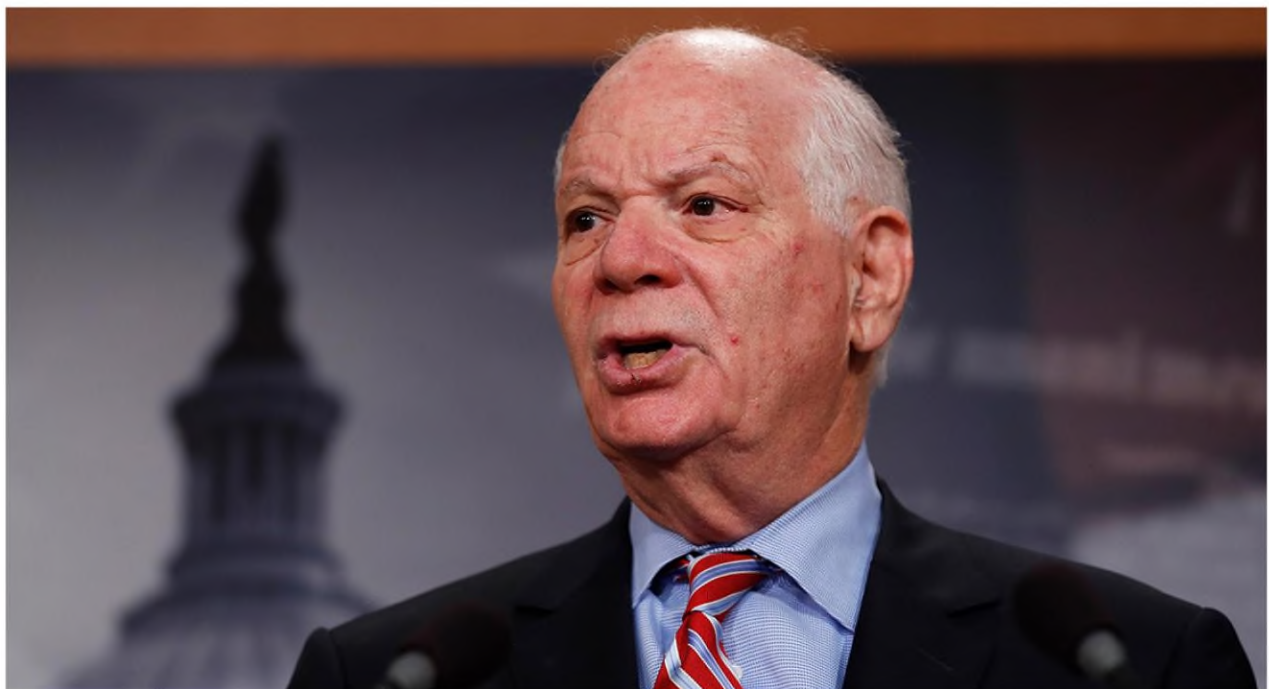
“This commitment is designed to ensure that Russia will not misuse any pipeline, including Nord Stream 2, to achieve aggressive political ends by using energy as a weapon,” the U.S. and German governments wrote in a joint statement.



The officials also argued that the Trump administration, not the Biden team, is responsible for the pipeline's completion. "We're making the best of a bad hand," one said, noting the pipeline was over 90 percent completed when the Biden administration came into office. "And in doing so we're trying to make sure that we protect our partner, Ukraine, and that's really our priority."

None of that will satisfy Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill, who spent the last few days expressing outrage as details of the U.S.-Germany deal leaked.

"Once [the pipeline] is up, the vulnerabilities are going to be there," Sen. Ben Cardin (D-Md.), a senior member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said in a brief interview. "I've always felt that we should've stopped it. But now we're at the point where it's going to be very difficult to prevent its use."



Sen. Ben Cardin (D-Md.) speaks during a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, May 24, 2017, about the Paris climate agreement. | Carolyn Kaster/AP

Another top Democrat, Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut, said the U.S.-Germany agreement "isn't perfect, but it's a good outcome under the circumstances." The idea that the U.S. can stop a pipeline that is 98 percent complete, Murphy added, "is based in fantasy, not reality." He said fracturing the U.S. relationship with Germany "would have come at an enormous, indefensible cost."

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Biden's agreement with Germany drew heavy criticism from Republicans, who accused Biden of "surrendering" to Putin.

"This is a generational geopolitical mistake," said Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas), who co-authored the sanctions and has been holding up Biden's State Department nominees to force action on the pipeline. "Russian dictators decades from now will be reaping billions of dollars every year from Joe Biden's gift."

It wasn't just members of Congress torching the U.S.-Germany deal. Ukraine's foreign affairs minister Dmytro Kuleba said in a [joint statement](#) with his Polish counterpart that the pact "cannot be considered sufficient to effectively limit the threats created by NS2," and "this crisis is significantly deepened by the resignation from attempts to stop the launch" of the pipeline.

"We call on the United States and Germany to adequately address the security crisis in our region, that Russia is the only beneficiary to," they added.

The U.S. and Germany have long been at odds over the risks and benefits of the pipeline. Germany views it as an economic priority and a way to import cheap energy into the country. The U.S., meanwhile, has maintained for consecutive administrations that the pipeline will damage European energy security in the long-term and will only serve Putin's interests.

"[The deal is] a reminder that while we share many values with our NATO allies and EU partners, our interests are often not aligned," Rep. Anthony Brown (D-Md.), a member of the House Armed Services Committee, told

POLITICO. “I’m concerned that European nations will invariably increase their dependence on Russian national gas, both from a security and climate perspective.”



Rep. Anthony Brown testifies during a House Committee on July 21, 2020. | Carolyn Kaster/AP Photo

Meanwhile, Ukraine has been caught in the middle of the pipeline fight. Ukrainian officials have said they believe the pipeline can still be stifled, and that the U.S. should take action to ensure it never gets completed.

The Biden administration has been trying to keep Ukraine at bay as it scrambles to contain the fallout. [POLITICO reported on Tuesday](#) that U.S. officials have urged Ukrainian officials to stay quiet about the pact with Germany, warning that public criticisms could damage the U.S.-Ukraine relationship. The U.S. has also asked Ukraine to refrain from discussing the matter with Congress, where Kyiv has plenty of allies.

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Responding to POLITICO's reporting, Mykhailo Podoliak, a top adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, said "Ukraine is receiving different signals at different levels." And lawmakers accused the Biden administration of "bullying" Ukraine.

"This poor, helpless nation facing down the evil Russian Federation that they described a year ago is no longer, I guess, to them, a victim," Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), vice chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said in a brief interview.

In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee earlier Wednesday, a top State Department official denied that the U.S. was pressuring Ukraine. Victoria Nuland, the under secretary of state for political affairs, told senators that "I know of nobody in the administration who has told [the Ukrainians] how to feel or how to speak about this."

In another olive branch to Ukraine, the White House announced on Wednesday that Zelensky would meet with Biden on August 30. Zelensky has eagerly awaited a presidential meeting, which was put on hold after the first impeachment case against former President Donald Trump.

"This is a bad situation and a bad pipeline but we need to help protect Ukraine and I feel that we have made some significant steps in that direction with this agreement," Nuland said.

Jonathan Custodio contributed to this report.

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